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UNDERSTANDING LANGUAGE TEACHER AUTONOMY: A CRITICAL REALIST PERSPECTIVE ON EFL SETTINGS IN TURKEY

Research Article

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UNDERSTANDING LANGUAGE TEACHER AUTONOMY: A CRITICAL REALIST PERSPECTIVE ON EFL SETTINGS IN TURKEY

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Abstract

This study examined the understandings and exercise of teacher autonomy and aimed to uncover the deep structure that might shape these in the EFL context in Turkey. The study relied on a range of data sources including documents, a questionnaire, observations and interviews with Turkish teachers of English, headteachers and educational administrators. Our findings highlight a complex interplay between structure and agency that underpins the emergence of teacher autonomy. We conclude that we need to extend our understanding of language teacher autonomy and identify the underlying mechanisms that shape the development and exercise of teacher autonomy within a particular context.

Keywords: teacher autonomy, teaching and assessment, school management, professional development, and curriculum development

1. Introduction

The concept of teacher autonomy is a topic of increasing interest to educational policymakers internationally and it has also been a topic of major concern in the field of applied linguistics for language learning and teaching since the 1970s. In many parts of the world (e.g. most of the European countries), the discussions around teacher autonomy have gained momentum as a result of decentralisation trends (Eurydice, 2008, Lundström, 2015). Teachers have been assigned new responsibilities and have become actively involved in decisions in their work contexts. This can be considered as a natural consequence of the decentralisation processes. However, this does not necessarily mean that teachers are fully autonomous. In the United States, Sparks and Malkus (2015), for the National Centre for Education Statistics, report that today's teachers are less likely to feel that they have a great deal of autonomy than they have been in the past. At the same time, they note that 'teachers who perceive that they have less autonomy are more likely to leave their positions ... or leav[e] the profession altogether' (p. 2). Teacher autonomy, they conclude, is closely related to teacher satisfaction and teacher attrition rates.

In Europe too, teacher autonomy is seen as playing an important role in improving the quality of education. Focusing on changes in the teaching profession in recent years, research conducted by the Eurydice European Unit (Eurydice, 2008) provides a comparative analysis of teacher autonomy and the educational responsibilities of teachers in European countries. According to Eurydice (2008), the autonomy of individual teachers is ever more limited by the dominance of team-based approaches to curriculum and assessment and by a growing reliance

on school leadership as a driver of change. While this is the case in decentralised education systems, the questions of what teacher autonomy means to teachers, schools or to top-level authorities in centralised and authoritarian education structures and whether or how it is implemented in these structures makes Turkey an interesting research context for an enquiry into teacher autonomy. Researching centralised education systems and the place of teacher autonomy within them contributes to gaining a complete and richer understanding of the concept of teacher autonomy across different educational structures. In fact, no education system or individual school is fully autonomous. Consequently, insights into how teachers exercise autonomy in centralised systems can be of equal help to those working in decentralised education systems. Our work offers insights to inform practice in a range of contexts.

The article first discusses Turkey's centralised education structure and some of the key changes it has undergone in recent years. Next, it explores the theoretical foundations of teacher autonomy by drawing on previous research in applied linguistics for language learning and teaching and introduces the approach to teacher autonomy taken in this study. The article then proceeds to present the methodology that has been devised to understand the exercise of teacher autonomy in the Turkish context. Lastly, it presents the key findings and concludes with an account of both the strengths and the limitations of this research study, before offering recommendations for further research.

1.1. The Turkish Education System

Turkey has a centralised educational structure which originated in 1924 (OECD, 2013). The Ministry of National Education (MoNE) is responsible for all educational activities for each school in the system on behalf of the state, and the general directorates and their units are responsible for different aspects of education and policy compliance (MoNE, 2005a). The education system, nevertheless, espouses democratic principles such as equality, the right to education, the needs of individuals and society, and cooperation between school and family as its base (MoNE, 2001; MoNE, 2005a). In recent years, many curricular and structural changes have taken place in the Turkish education system. One such initiative is the 2023 Vision Strategy.

One of the aims of the 2023 Vision Strategy of Turkish Republic is to improve the quality of education particularly by promoting the idea of people-oriented management in schools, which values a participatory approach. This undoubtedly implies more autonomy for schools and teachers. Since the announcement of the 2023 Vision Strategy, a number of changes have taken place in the education system. These include the implementation of the 12 years compulsory education programme, award ceremonies for innovation in education, the introduction and subsequent abandonment of a new centralised assessment system, TEOG¹, for lower secondary schools which pupils attend in Years 5, 6, 7 and 8 (ages 9-12), the announcement of a democratisation package and the implementation of a quality management system. Despite these changes however, the level of English language proficiency remains very low in Turkey (EF English Proficiency Index, 2018).

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Language teacher autonomy

A predominant thread in discussions about teacher autonomy in the field of applied linguistics for language teaching and learning is the idea that teachers who themselves are autonomous may have a positive influence on the development of autonomy in their students (Little, 1995, 2000; Balçıkanlı, 2009; Lamb and Reinders, 2008; Al-Asmari, 2013). In these

¹ A new system has been introduced in 2018: Transferring to Secondary Schools.

studies, the notion of teacher autonomy usually designates a professional capacity, which is acquired through self-directed professional development and this is linked to a commitment on the part of teachers to foster learner autonomy in their classrooms (Benson and Huang, 2008). In other words, the extent to which teachers are able to foster learner autonomy in their classrooms is regarded as an indicator of their own autonomy.

There have also been those in the field who conceptualised teacher autonomy slightly differently (e.g. McGrath, 2000; Wilches, 2007; Smith and Erdoğan, 2008; La Ganza, 2008; Huang, 2013; Raya and Vieira, 2015). According to McGrath (2000), for instance, teacher autonomy should not only been seen as a prerequisite for learner autonomy but as an important element in teacher professionalism. Smith and Erdoğan (2008) also argue that we must go beyond our own discourse community, if we want our views on learner and teacher autonomy to be taken seriously. Smith and Erdoğan (2008) define teacher autonomy as ‘the ability to develop appropriate skills, knowledge and attitudes for oneself as a teacher, in cooperation with others’ (p. 83).

Whilst maintaining a strong focus on the interdependence of learner autonomy and teacher autonomy, La Ganza (2008) examines teacher autonomy in terms of teachers’ relationships with others. She recognises that teachers’ professional relationships with other individuals within the educational or bureaucratic institution might have an influence on the teaching process, on the teacher’s freedom to be creative, on developing and practicing ideas and pursuing his or her ideals. According to La Ganza (2008), teacher autonomy is an ‘interrelational construct created within four main kinds of relations’ (pp. 72-77): teacher-internal teacher relationships, teacher and learner relationships; teacher and institutional relationships; and teacher and bureaucracy relationships. Raya and Vieira (2015, p. 23), on the other hand, propose that teacher autonomy is about ‘being willing and able to challenge non-democratic traditions [...] and this entails the ability to question reality as we believe *it is* and explore possibilities that make it closer to what we believe it *should be* [original emphasis].’

To conclude, within writings on teacher autonomy in ELT, a tendency is noticeable towards seeing the concept of teacher autonomy as a necessary condition for developing learner autonomy and as a concept that is restricted to the classroom or language-related issues. However, our investigation convinces us that scrutiny of the exercise of autonomy by language teachers needs to be extended, to encompass not only their classroom practice but also the wider organizational roles that they are called on to play.

2.2 Towards a new conceptualization of language teacher autonomy

Autonomy is a psychological need. When it is undermined, a decline in performance is inevitable (Ryan and Deci, 2006; Deci and Ryan, 2012). When people's autonomy is supported, this strengthens their attachment to their work and improves their well-being. Thus, autonomy is important for promoting better work performance and better adjustment (Deci and Ryan, 2014). Much of the literature on teacher autonomy (e.g. Friedman, 1999; Öztürk, 2011) suggests that it is important to enhance the autonomy of teachers because enfranchising them improves the quality of their teaching and helps them cope with changes in the education system.

A growing body of research recognises the fact that teachers take on a number of roles outside the classroom and fulfill a variety of tasks as professionals within their working contexts (Biddle et al., 1997; Katzenmeyer and Moller, 2001; Frost, 2012; Kelchtermans, 2013). They are assigned a number of curricular and non-curricular tasks such as ‘maintaining order, protecting the school environment, holding meetings with parents, leading extra-curricular events, attending outreach activities in the community, and the like’ (Biddle et al.,

1997, p. 2). However, this should not lead us to view teachers as unquestioningly applying institutional rules or performing assigned tasks in their working contexts. Instructional norms, rules, acting in conformity with others can be vital in the teaching profession but teachers are actors with private wants and beliefs that influence their intentions and attitudes (Lindblad, 1997). Teachers as members of a profession can still act autonomously and obeying instructions does not mean that one is not acting autonomously (Tietjens-Meyers, 1987, Davis, 1996). Autonomy for teachers is not utopian, but it is something that they need to claim or create spaces for (Anderson, 1987).

Friedman (1999) offers a more active image of the teacher by dividing teacher task areas into pedagogical and organizational activities. Friedman identifies four areas of teacher functioning: Student teaching and assessment; school mode of operating; staff development; and curriculum development. By drawing on these areas, this study attempts to expand our understanding of language teacher autonomy by considering the concept within and outside the classroom. In this study, teacher autonomy is described as a workplace construct in which teachers reflectively create spaces for collaboration, taking initiatives and responsibility, using discretion and participating in decision-making in relation to (a) teaching and assessment, (b) school management, (c) professional development, and (d) curriculum development.

When researching teacher autonomy, this study draws on the critical realist understanding of the relationship between agency and [social] structure, developed by Roy Bhaskar. According to critical realism, social structures already exist for every individual. Individuals do not create society out of nothing, but instead they modify it self-consciously by reproducing or transforming it 'so as to maximise the possibilities for the development and spontaneous exercise of their natural (species) powers' (Bhaskar, 1998, p. 217). Thus, this study considers teachers as active agents with emergent powers. This suggests that teachers are not powerless. By finding a way to deal with the constraints generated by social structures (e.g. the classroom, the school and the educational system as a whole), teachers can change things. This is how autonomy is seen to emerge in this study and it is at this level that teachers take steps to create spaces for autonomous actions. It is also acknowledged in this study that teachers do not simply react to the enablements and constraints of social structures like 'billiard balls' that are hit (Astbury and Leeuw, 2010, p. 370) and that their behaviour is not entirely determined by the school organisation or their role specification (Elder-Vass, 2010). Hence, we should not assume that teachers behave autonomously when there are enabling conditions but are unable to do so when there are constraining conditions. They can behave autonomously if they choose to do so and are subject to the right conditions to enable them to do so or they can choose to create their own opportunities for autonomy by critically evaluating the social structures in which they are operating. Accordingly, the research reported in this paper addresses three questions:

1. How is teacher autonomy understood in EFL context at lower secondary state schools in Turkey?
2. According to Turkish teachers of English, headteachers and educational administrators, how does teacher autonomy emerge in these schools, in relation to:
 - a) Teaching and assessment;
 - b) School management;
 - c) Professional development;
 - d) Curriculum development?

3. What are the mechanisms that shape the understandings and the practices of teacher autonomy with reference to English Language Teaching?

3.Methods

Taking a mixed methods approach, the research involved collecting and interrogating a range of data, including documents, online survey responses, on-site observation notes, and interviews with Turkish teachers of English, head teachers and educational administrators. A number of documents (e.g MoNE, 1995; 2008; 2009; 2013; Doğan, 2012; Türkiye-Eğitim. 2013) were used in this study. The selection and collection of these documents began in the very early phases of research and lasted until data analysis was completed. Documents provided information on the Turkish education system, the roles of teachers, and the way schools operate. They also guided the later stages of the study and provided a means of tracking changes within the Turkish education system.

In designing the survey questionnaire, Friedman's (1999) Teacher Work-Autonomy Scale was adapted in which teacher autonomy is regarded as an empowering construct according to which teachers can create their own spaces within the constraints present in their working contexts. The total number of English teachers surveyed was 88. The final section of the survey invited respondents to participate further in the study. Among those who expressed their willingness to participate further, three were chosen for the observation study.

The observation study participants, Mehmet, Özlem, Sema² taught English in a central Anatolian province. The length of observation was 17 hours 40 minutes. Each teacher was observed both in the classroom and in the wider school environment. Informal conversations were recorded. All three schools were state-run lower secondary schools and had students from mixed social backgrounds.

This study takes into account the different perspectives of stakeholders and listens to the voices of diverse participants in order to understand the deeper structures inherent in the education system in relation to teacher autonomy. Thus, five English teachers (Mehmet, Derya, Sema, Gizem, Özlem), three headteachers (Ali, Serkan, Hüseyin) and six educational administrators from three different provincial and district directorates (Hakan, Ünal, Deniz, Ahmet, Emre, Ediz) were interviewed. English teachers were selected for an interview among those who completed the questionnaire survey and stated their willingness to participate further. Three of these interview informants had previously been observed. The headteachers and educational administrators were approached in person. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed as soon as possible afterwards. The data obtained from documents, questionnaire responses, field notes and interview transcripts were analysed separately. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was gained from [the university's name is concealed] Human Participants and Materials Ethics Committee. This research was conducted in Turkey with the permission of the MoNE's General Directorate of Innovation and Educational Technologies.

4.Main findings and discussion

4.1 Understandings of teacher autonomy

An initial objective of this research was to explore understandings of teacher autonomy in the context of Turkish state lower secondary schools with a focus on English language teaching. By means of documentary analysis, it was possible to gain a good understanding of the Turkish education system and the place of teacher autonomy within it. The survey questionnaire, observations and the interviews conducted with Turkish teachers of English,

² All names in this article are pseudonyms.

headteachers and educational administrators provided evidence uncovering how teacher autonomy was understood by those involved at different levels of the education system. In the early stages of data collection it turned out that this was a question with no simple answer.

The analysis of documents demonstrated that the term ‘teacher autonomy’ was not present in any of the educational policy documents despite the frequent use of the related expression ‘learner autonomy.’ Nevertheless, there was evidence in the data that the Turkish education system was familiar with the idea of teacher autonomy. The idea manifested itself in a variety of ways in the policy documents. Teachers, for example, were encouraged to take initiatives, to exercise discretion in order to meet students’ needs, to work collaboratively within schools, to participate in decision-making processes, and to take responsibility for their own professional development (MoNE, 2005b; 2005c; 2012; 2014). As a result of the recent changes introduced to the education system, teachers were also given more of a voice in identifying their professional developmental needs, in evaluating the performance of their school head teachers once a year, in taking active roles in school related issues or participating in textbook selection panels. These panels are responsible for reviewing textbooks before the final decision is made and they are distributed nationwide. The panels comprise eight people, of whom four are subject teachers. For reviewing English textbooks, for instance, four English teachers are required to contribute.

The analysis of interview data demonstrated a high degree of commonality in the views of the participants. This gave detailed insights into the interview participants’ actual understanding of teacher autonomy and its nature. Almost all the participants regardless of their positions within the education system were in support of teacher autonomy, but acknowledged the constraints of the education system. For many, going beyond the limits meant exercising full freedom and independence and this, for some, was deemed to be a threat to the unity of the Turkish education system. For Gizem, an English teacher, for instance, autonomy meant freedom, being free from constraint, using her full capacity for the benefit of the school and her students. Derya, another English teacher, said she was autonomous as long as she did not go beyond the boundaries and added: ‘I don’t know how it would work if we all claimed autonomy [...]. What sort of chaos would there be?’ Hüseyin, a headteacher, repeated several times that teachers used their discretion and expertise in their classrooms but he later added that the reality of the Turkish educational system may make this difficult to achieve. The participants’ view of autonomy within the confines of the education system suggests that it is possible for teachers to act autonomously without having control over the basic direction of their professional lives (Tietjens-Meyers, 1987). This acknowledges that teachers’ behaviour is determined not only by their work contexts but also by their causal power as active agents (Davis, 1996; Elder-Vass, 2010).

Furthermore, the emphasis in the interview data on the limits of the education system indicated that the participants were aware of the factors that may influence the exercise of autonomy by teachers. Awareness of the social context and its limits is important for the exercise of autonomy (Deci and Ryan, 2012). When teachers have a good understanding of their social environments and what is happening around them, they will be able to avoid or resist the potentially negative effects of any factors that constrain their autonomy in their work contexts (Deci and Ryan, 2012). Overall, the data signifies that teacher autonomy was a meaningful concept among those working in the education system and the participants agreed that the exercise of autonomy by teachers is necessary on condition that the limits of the education system are not overstepped.

4.2 Emergence of teacher autonomy

One of the aims of this study was to explore the emergence of teacher autonomy in the Turkish lower secondary school context. The rest of this section responds to the second research question, which aimed to understand the extent to which teacher autonomy was exercised by the Turkish teachers of English in relation to teaching and assessment, school management, professional development and curriculum development.

4.2.1 Teaching and assessment

The analysis of survey data showed that the teachers in the sample generally enjoyed autonomy in the area of teaching and assessment. 71.6% of respondents, for instance, said they were frequently or always free to select teaching methods and strategies other than those suggested by MoNE and 78.4% of the respondents always or frequently determined the amount of homework to be assigned. A split in opinion was apparent in the data in relation to assessment activities. 47.7% of respondents indicated that they were frequently or always free to use their own assessment techniques in their classes, independent of those suggested by MoNE. 44.3%, on the other hand, said they used their own assessment techniques in their classes only occasionally or not at all. The interview and observation data, on the other hand, showed that:

- Through their recognition of students' needs and the use of their problem solving skills, the teachers in the sample were able to make adjustments to their lessons and design assessment activities appropriately, but this also depended on the interplay between agency and social structures;
- Teacher autonomy may take different forms (including deviant ones) depending on the context of study.

First, the significance of meeting the needs of students is emphasised both in the 2023 Vision Strategy and in the English teaching curriculum. This means that, in principle, the education system allows teachers to use discretion in the classroom to design their lessons around the local context in which they are working to meet individual student needs. Similarly, for almost all the teachers in the interview sample, it was very important to respond to the needs of their students. This was usually reflected in their responses to the question of what a good English teacher was. Mehmet, a Turkish teacher of English, for example, talked about how his students' psychological or emotional conditions on the day when they were being taught guided him with respect to which part of the curriculum he needed to focus on. Gizem, another teacher, also mentioned that the students had particular needs in the local context where she was working, and her priority was to broaden their horizons. These teachers were able to tailor their lessons to the needs of their students, preparing relevant assessment activities and taking action for the benefit of students, evaluating the emerging demands, dilemmas and ambiguities of the classroom.

Second, according to the regulation of Primary Education Institutions, students in lower secondary schools take two exams from subjects with three or less than three weekly teaching hours; and three exams from those subjects with more than three weekly teaching hours. The subject teachers set these exams. Furthermore, students also take three exams in Year 8 in lower secondary schools. The subject teacher sets the first and second exams and the third is the centralised TEOG examination that is set by MoNE. The students' overall results then determine the types of high school, they can gain admission to. Neither the English language teaching curriculum nor any other policy documents contain any information limiting teachers' use of assessment activities in the classroom. This suggests that teachers of English are relatively free in relation to the in-class assessment choices they make.

Teacher testimony revealed that this freedom might lead to the emergence of what can only be considered distorted forms of teacher autonomy. Some of the teachers in the interview sample reported that they inflated exam results in order to boost students' centralised exam results and to increase their overall school success. They stated that they were experiencing a great deal of pressure from parents and school management due to the centralised exam. One of the teachers [anonymised for the purposes of additional confidentiality] confessed that 'I set an exam the other day. All my students did really badly so I threw the papers in the bin. Normally I am not allowed to do this, but they needed to do better.' This teacher insisted that her/his students did not have access to the same opportunities as those elsewhere in the country. As Raya and Vieira (2015) suggest, what these teachers are doing is questioning reality as they believe it to be, and exploring possibilities that make it closer to what they believe it should be. In isolation, this may have suggested that this distorted version of autonomy is a by-product of individual teacher behaviour, beliefs and values. However, the data shows that it is derived from the nexus between teacher actors, including their beliefs and values, and parents and headteachers who, pressured, then pressure teachers to guarantee success in the centralised exam.

4.2.2 School management

The survey showed that respondents' views in relation to school management were generally negative, but most of them stated that they felt a great sense of involvement in and ownership of what was happening in the school (54.6%). Indeed, the analysis of interview and observation data showed that teachers were able to get involved in the decisions relating to their weekly timetabling and, in some cases, relating to the choice of year groups and classes. Sema, a Turkish teacher of English, for instance, said some of her colleagues preferred not to teach in the mornings, but she chose to do the morning teaching so that she could have the rest of the day for herself. According to the data from this study, the relationship with headteachers, with other teachers and the needs and willingness of teachers themselves were the main determinants of the extent to which they were involved in decisions in the area of school management. Mehmet, for example, needed to keep Fridays free in order to take care of his parents. To guarantee this, he needed to enter into negotiations with the headteacher or the deputy headteachers. During the first hours of the observation at Mehmet's school, how this was negotiated was witnessed. The following dialogue was recorded between the deputy headteacher and Mehmet:

Mehmet: Can't we change the timetable again?

Deputy headteacher: No, that would not be possible; but I can change the day of your school guard work.

Mehmet: But...

Deputy head teacher: [Silence]

Mehmet: Ok, sort this out in one way or another, please.

Deputy headteacher: Your school guard duty will be on Mondays, done?

A few hours later, at the end of another class, Mehmet was ready to leave. He came across the deputy headteacher in front of the classroom and as Mehmet asked if the problem was sorted out now, the headteacher grabbed his arm and came up to him, pretending to punch Mehmet. He was certainly joking, and it was not clear to the researcher if this was something that happened often. Mehmet, however, seemed very embarrassed. As he smoked another cigarette outside the school, he talked about the incident very briefly: 'I have to take things easy so that they will spare me Fridays.'

The analysis of documents and interviews with the headteachers and educational administrators provided supplementary insights into teacher involvement in school management. According to the participants, teacher involvement in school management was generally achieved through teacher participation in the Board of Teachers, school teams and committees, and by carrying out teacher guard duty. When defining autonomy as the essential condition of self-government, Feinberg (1989) suggests that a person may have the capacity for, and the right to self-government, but this is not sufficient. A person also needs an opportunity to exercise this right and capacity. However, the findings of this study show that the existence of opportunities, together with individual capacity, does not necessarily result in the emergence of autonomy and that the particular school context as well as the individual working relationships within it matter to a great extent.

4.2.3 Professional development

A majority of survey respondents stated that they were able to identify professional development targets (46.6%), engage in action research (51.2%), help less experienced teachers (73.8%), and take risks (67%). However, survey respondents did not feel it was possible to inform MoNE about their professional development needs (62.5%), or to influence the appointment of the instructors of in-service training seminars (64.8%). Overall, there was little evidence in the analysis of interview and observation data that teachers felt able to exercise autonomy in relation to their professional development. The responses of the teacher interviewees were dominated by complaints about the scarcity and poor quality of the development programmes organized by MoNE. They were critical of these training programmes, but had a passive and acquiescent attitude towards taking action to change (or attempt to change) the current situation.

In relation to MoNE-organised training, it seems at first sight that a lack of teacher agency impeded the emergence of autonomy in relation to professional development. Analysis of interviews with the educational administrators suggested the same. They believed teachers were reluctant to get involved in or create spaces for autonomy in professional development. Hakan, an educational administrator, for instance, mentioned that he was willing to organise specialised local training seminars at the request of teachers. Ediz, another educational administrator, talked about the online training available to teachers. These educational administrators also criticised the L2 competence levels of English teachers: ‘there are many English teachers who cannot speak in English with a tourist. There are many things they can do to improve their professional skills’ (Hakan). The analysis of interviews with teachers, however, showed that these teachers were not aware that they could contact the provincial and/or district national directorates to communicate their training needs. Similarly, no indication of awareness of online courses was found in the interview data. This suggests that lack of communication between MoNE and teachers coupled with teachers’ lack of agency negatively determines the extent to which teacher autonomy is exercised in the area of professional development.

Awareness of the social context and its limits is important for the exercise of autonomy (Deci and Ryan, 2012). However, as demonstrated in the data, awareness of the constraints on one's exercise of autonomy is not sufficient. It is essential to have an awareness of the opportunities for teacher autonomy that exist in the education system and to be able to create spaces for the exercise of autonomy, whether individually or collectively. Each person has some capacities and teachers are not powerless, but it is necessary for teachers to see that they have power and that they can play a role in improving the present conditions (Bhaskar, 1998). However, the achievement of agentic capacities depends on the interaction of these capacities and available structures (Danermark, 2012). As the data from this study shows, a lack of

communication between MoNE and teachers about the opportunities available for professional development and the lack of intention to take action on the part of teachers appear to co-determine the extent to which teachers exercised autonomy in the area of professional development.

4.2.4 Curriculum development

The generic teacher competencies published by MoNE (2008) indicate that monitoring, evaluating and developing the curriculum programme are among the competencies teachers must possess. Teachers are expected to make suggestions on the curriculum development process in the light of problems experienced during implementation. Analysis of the data showed that this was generally carried out through teacher focus group meetings and the reports submitted to the relevant district directorates of MoNE. Focus group meetings are held twice a year by subject teachers (e.g. English teachers) working in the same school. These teachers produce a report at the end of each meeting, which addresses the concerns discussed, and makes suggestions for better practice. Each English teachers' focus group in schools chooses a chair at the beginning of the term. The chair is responsible for writing the report. In addition to this, the chair of the focus group meets other chairs from a number of different schools within the same district once a year. This suggests that, despite its centralised structure, MoNE values teacher feedback in curriculum development and involves teachers in this process, albeit rather obliquely. However, the data from the interviews undertaken with teachers tell a different story.

For the teachers who participated in the interviews, the focus group meetings were 'so-called meetings'. Derya's comments were particularly noteworthy, as she said that she and her colleagues envisaged these meetings primarily as social get-togethers. Despite the presence of a structure, which enables teachers to exercise agency in curriculum development and develop autonomy, teachers' attitudes towards focus group meetings appear to be characterised by their lack of agency. However, the analysis of data suggested that although MoNE gives teachers the opportunity to get engaged in curriculum development through focus group meetings, the teachers in the interview sample were convinced that their views were not taken into account and all agreed that their reports were not read by MoNE officials, since no feedback was provided to them. As a result, they were convinced that their views and expertise did not matter to MoNE.

The comments of the educational administrators about teacher focus group meeting reports, however, showed that despite the centralised structure of MoNE, its institutional culture may vary widely. Hakan answered without any hesitation: 'Of course these [focus group meeting reports] are all read.' Ünal, however, claimed the opposite: 'The files gather dust on the shelves unless MoNE [Ankara office] orders us to look them up and find out if there are any interesting ideas.' Deniz and Ahmet commented that the reports were read partly or fully, but because they could not take any action in relation to the concerns expressed in them, there would be no response to the teachers. Finally, Emre hinted that the way district and provincial directorates dealt with these reports might differ from one directorate to another: 'In this district directorate, we try to read meeting reports as much as we can'

These findings raise many questions about the centralised structure of MoNE, the roles and responsibilities of provincial and district directorates and the spaces they afford for autonomous action. They also suggest that, as well as MoNE being a large centralised organisation, its parts may have causal powers in their own right. Elder-Vass (2010) explains this by attributing a laminated view to social structure and arguing that we sometimes need to treat a structure quite explicitly as a stratified ensemble. In the case of teacher involvement in curriculum development, while MoNE at national level aims to engage teachers in the evaluation of the curriculum through teacher focus group meetings, the strategies adopted by provincial and

district directorates for dealing with these meeting reports may act as an obstacle to genuine engagement and constrain teachers' causal powers to exercise autonomy. In other words, the different layers within MoNE (national, provincial and district directorates) can easily work against each other.

4.3 Underlying mechanisms

Geopolitical context and trust were identified as two of the mechanisms that shape understandings and the exercise of teacher autonomy in the context of Turkey.

4.3.1 Geopolitical context

Within the geopolitical context of the Republic of Turkey, unity stands as a fundamental and paramount notion. The data from this study, for instance, suggest that the principle of unity plays a role in shaping how the participants understand teacher autonomy in the Turkish context. Participants were concerned by threats to educational unity and a potential source of chaos in schools. It was apparent from the views of these informants that autonomy was seen as such a threat to unity and that they felt that the inability to unite would result in disorder and confusion. Enabling autonomy, however, meets a basic human need (Ryan and Deci, 2006). This then may assure social harmony, a well-functioning civil society and high social capital (Sahlberg, 2007), which are effective means of fostering unity.

The Turkish education system has embarked on many wide-ranging changes. A particular desire on the part of MoNE to generate engagement on the part of teachers with issues relating to teaching and assessment, school management, professional development and curriculum development is apparent. The data in this study suggest that in many cases these changes are promising in terms of teacher autonomy, but there appear to be problems stemming from a clash of messages about the opportunities available to teachers. Teachers, for instance, are asked to take part in the textbook selection panels, but only a very limited number of teachers are involved in the process and their role is confined to reviewing and choosing from a list predetermined by MoNE. Nevertheless, recent initiatives are providing opportunities for the exercise of autonomy by teachers outside the classroom and the 2023 Vision Strategy suggests that the focus will be widened in the near future. However, the findings of this study raise some questions about the readiness and willingness of teachers and head teachers to welcome these new roles and embrace change and this has implications for in-service and teacher education programmes in the country.

4.3.2 Trust

The testimony collected for this study suggests that there is an issue of trust within and around the Turkish education system, in relation to English language teaching. The educational administrators, for instance, made severe criticisms of Turkish teachers of English. Almost all the educational administrators questioned the English teachers' L2 competence and quite explicitly expressed lack of trust in their expertise or their willingness to develop themselves professionally. Trust issues were also apparent in the analysis of survey and teacher interview data. The findings indicated that some of the teachers had little trust in MoNE. They did not believe MoNE valued them. They also did not believe that MoNE was aware of local students' needs and levels and were convinced that the reports of their views from the focus group meetings were not even read by MoNE officials. Some of the survey respondents thought MoNE did not take their opinions and experiences into account and even if they had the opportunity to make their voice heard, this would not make any difference. The lack of trust these teachers have in MoNE appears to affect their agential powers in a negative way, thus eliminating the spaces they might potentially create for autonomy. Lundström (2015) argues

that distrust has further consequences for teachers such as a loss in their commitment to the profession, job motivation, morale and eventually autonomy.

Admittedly, building a culture of trust is important in an education system and that eventually contributes to improving the quality of education (Sahlberg, 2007). We acknowledge that this can be a slow process and requires particular commitment from MoNE. The initial step seems to be the realisation of the erosion of trust in teachers and in teachers' trust in MoNE, and an acknowledgement of trust as valuable social capital. Sahlberg (2007), when defining the culture of trust, emphasises the importance of a recognition on the part of authorities and political leaders that teachers together with head teachers, parents and their local communities know how to provide the best possible education for students. The data in this study indicates that within the current structure of the Turkish education system, there may well be scope to build a culture of trust (e.g. by providing feedback to the teachers about their meeting reports). Creating an autonomy-supportive environment in which teachers can find ways to satisfy their need for competence and relatedness, as Deci and Ryan argue (2014), can be the first path towards a culture of trust. This makes trust both a mechanism that shapes the exercise of autonomy and a consequence of an autonomy-supportive culture.

5. Conclusion

By considering teacher autonomy as a workplace construct within and outside the classroom and English teachers as members of large social organisations who fulfil a number of other duties and responsibilities within schools and by drawing on critical realism, this study contributes to the field of applied linguistics for language learning and teaching by providing an alternative approach to teacher autonomy and extending our understanding of it. The findings of this study can be used to help open up new opportunities to re-examine the quality of English teaching by shifting the focus to Turkish teachers of English and their professional lives.

One of the key strengths of the current study is that it explored the understandings and exercise of teacher autonomy not only from the perspective of Turkish teachers of English, but also through the perceptions of headteachers and educational administrators. The inclusion of diverse participants working at various levels of the education system provided a more complete picture of the concept of teacher autonomy in the country. However, the observation and interview study were carried out in a single province. An observation/interview study undertaken with participants from different provinces might have generated further examples of the exercise of autonomy by teachers. In order to extend our knowledge of teacher autonomy, more research is needed with a critical realist focus. This type of research will not only provide further insights into the mechanisms influencing teacher autonomy, but also into how these mechanisms interact with each other. Such an approach also has the potential to uncover the processes leading to the development and exercise of teacher autonomy.

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